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Government Experts Challenge Reports of Soviet SALT Violations

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Government specialists say that a string of recent press reports alleging the Soviets have violated the SALT II strategic arms agreement by deploying the outlawed SS16 mobile missile are wrong.

But they acknowledge that there is still some uncertainty and disagreement as to the intended role and present deployment of this weapon, which has been the subject of dispute within intelligence circles for many years.

Informed officials in several government agencies say that a top-secret, just-published U.S. national intelligence estimate concludes there has been no violation thus far of the SALT II agreement by Moscow, even though that 1979 agreement signed by President Carter and Soviet President Leonid I. Brezhnev has never been ratified by the U.S. Senate and has been all but disavowed by the Reagan administration.

While there is still some ambiguity about the status of the SS16, officials who watch such matters closely agree that it is not deployed in a mobile fashion, which would be a violation of SALT, and that if the Russians ever do deploy a new mobile missile it is not likely to be the SS16.

Secret deployment of the mobile SS16 would fuel an already high state of tension between the two superpowers on nuclear weapons issues.

Both countries, thus far, have continued informally to adhere to the SALT II provisions, apparently with the expectation that some new round of arms-control talks covering strategic or continent-spanning atomic missiles and bombers will eventually take place.

The SALT II treaty and so-called "common understandings" reached between the United States and Soviet Union in that accord specifically require that Moscow not "produce, test or deploy ICBMs of the SS16 type," which are mobile weapons carted around the countryside on wheeled vehicles. Because they are mobile, they would be very hard for U.S. picture-taking satellites to spot and thus very hard to count and verify in any arms control agreement. They would also be hard to attack in a war.

Officials with detailed knowledge of the situation say there has been some dispute about the SS16 ever since test models began to appear in the mid-1970s. The Soviets test-fired the missile from a test range at Plesetsk in 1976 but stopped the testing after the 1979 SALT agreement was signed and have not tested it since then, the sources say.

One authoritative official says that the heart of the latest discussion and the cause for some disagreement about the missile within the top echelons of U.S. intelligence is a new "belief" that the Russians, back in the 1970s, actually produced a lot more SS16s than U.S. spy satellites ever observed being tested. The central question is what has become of these, if in fact they were produced. Are they being used for training or are they being secretly deployed in fixed sites? These are questions being asked, one official said, while stating that there is no evidence of a deployment.

There are some of the original SS16s—one well-placed official put the number at less than two dozen—still at the Plesetsk range. They are said to be in "fixed" positions and "certainly not mobile," as another official put it.

The Pentagon's intelligence arm maintained for some time that there were indeed SS16s at Plesetsk and sources say that there is now more widespread agreement within the

One experienced official describes the missiles at Plesetsk as "devices still at a test range and in various stages of readiness. But there is no proof that it has ever been 'deployed' . . . and to call it a real system is stretching it."

But on April 3, The New York Post, citing U.S. officials, reported that "three Soviet mobile missile regiments, each equipped with 12 nuclear-tipped SS16 rockets, are poised in the frigid wastelands near Perm" in the Soviet Union.

On April 5, the syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak reported that there is "a new, still-secret consensus among U.S. intelligence agencies, following months of bitter dispute, that the Soviet Union has deployed almost 200 mobile intercontinental missiles in violation of the SALT II treaty."

The next day, State Department spokesman Dean Fischer publicly denied those reports, stating that "our intelligence information does not support these statements." But immediately following that, The Baltimore Sun reported that "other [unnamed] officials, indignant at the denial" made by Fischer, reaffirmed the main points made by the columnists.

One source says that there seems to be "something or somebody" that has chosen to heighten concern over the SS16 recently, although a top-ranking specialist calls the public descriptions of the situation that have appeared thus far "mostly garbage."

The reports began to appear after President Reagan, at a news conference, claimed that "the Soviet Union does have a definite margin of superiority" in nuclear weapons. Some officials speculate that circulation of the SS16 reports may be meant to add credence to that claim, though they stress they have no idea of whether this particular issue was in the back of the president's mind.